Toward a Unified Theory of Scandal-Naming

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Body

THE WATERGATESince a Washington hotel and office complex lent its name to the most important political crime in American history 40 years ago, "Watergate" has become synonymous with scandal. The suffix "-gate" has been affixed to dozens of scandals large and small (and very small), from Climategate, which rolled back decades of public-trust-building on the science of global warming, to Nipplegate, the infamous Super Bowl "wardrobe malfunction," to Fajitagate , an incident involving three off-duty San Francisco police officers and a bag of steak fajitas that led to the toppling of two police chiefs.

And "-gate" long ago escaped the bounds of American politics and the English language. Column-inch-limited headline writers in Argentina , Azerbaijan , Canada , Finland , Germany , Italy , Mexico , Poland , South Africa , and especially the UK have all imported "-gate" for their own homegrown scandals. Many involve sports. Some involve bolognese sauce: The Montreal restaurant community was rocked last year by Pastagate , when Québéc's language enforcers warned an upscale restaurant to stop using Italian words like "pasta" on its menu instead of the French equivalent. Very few rise near the level of Watergate.

We need a new term for these sub-gate scandals.

As British social scientist James Stanyer has noted, "Revelations are given the 'gate' suffix to add a thin veil of credibility, following 'Watergate', but most bear no resemblance to the painstaking investigation of that particular piece of presidential corruption." (Disclosure: **National Journal's** offices are located in the Watergate complex, which, by the way, gets its name from the nearby mouth of the C&O Canal and/or a discontinued summer concert series.)

In fact, this degradation of scandal may have been the point of "-gate's" creation. Former Nixon speechwriter cum **New York Times** columnist William Safire was the first to detach "gate" from "water" as early as September 1974, and he went on to coin many more "gates," including some of the biggies: Briefingate , Travelgate , Whitewatergate , among a dozen or so others.

As Columbia Journalism School's Michael Schudson and others have argued, Safire's cornucopia of "-gates" were an attempt to distance himself from Nixon and minimize Watergate as just one of myriad quotidian bureaucratic indiscretions and silly tabloid scandals. Safire basically admitted as much years later, saying his favorite "-gates" were for minor scandals, like Doublebillingsgate, which involved some contractors double-billing the government.

Meanwhile, it works the other way around too. "Turning a scandal into a 'gate' has often been an effort to use the emotive power of language for political advantage," Schudson explains. This is basically Darrell Issa's full-time job as chairman of the House Oversight Committeeto hang a "-gate" on as much of the Obama administration as possible.

These criticisms are nothing new. Journalists and linguists have condemned the reductionism of "-gate" since at least the 1980s, and yet new scandals get gated all the time. It's a convenient heuristic. "All you people complaining about the use of -gate as an all-purpose suffix for scandals have never tried writing a headline, have you?" **Politico** Magazine Deputy Editor Blake Hounshell tweeted this week. Safire himself understood this: "The formulation with the -gate suffix is too useful to fade quickly," he wrote in his political dictionary .

While it'd probably be ideal to banish "-gate" entirely from the journalistic lexicon, that's clearly not going to happen. So maybe the next best thing is to add a second (or even third) suffix for lesser scandals that don't rise to "-gate" level imbroglio.

Of course, trying to determine what makes one scandal "real" and another not is likely a fool's errand in postmodern Washington, where truth is mostly relative. Trying to value scandals on their merits leads to what might be called Scandal Math. Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, once said that Benghazi was bigger than if you put "Watergate and Iran-Contra together and multiply it times maybe 10." John Dean, Nixon's former White House counsel, meanwhile, wrote a book alleging that George W. Bush's "secret presidency" was "worse than Watergate." These things are too relative and tricky to weigh fairly.

We need a more empirical categorization. For that, we can turn to Dartmouth political scientist Brendan Nyhan, who has one of the most widely cited theories on political scandals. In a nutshell, he argues that scandals are a co-production of the media and the opposition party, and only form when both are on board. No media buy-in, no real scandal.

Take the scandal du jour, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie's closing of toll lanes on the George Washington Bridge. At first, Democrats cared, but the national media did not. But when emails emerged last week showing clearly that Christie aides planned the traffic delays to exact political revenge, the issue suddenly became a "-gate," with wall-to-wall press coverage and the full aura of scandal.

So what would we call the controversy before the emails leaked? We need something that has all the metonymic value of "-gate," but none of its connotation of veracity. Something that tells readers, "Some people are trying to make this a scandal, but we're not sure yet."

There are countless partisan pseudo-scandals on both sides that could potentially lend their names, but one obvious choice is Benghazi. It's already being widely compared to the bridge closings both ironically and not (see: Fox News , Karl Rove , Republicans), with many dubbing the Christie controversy Bridgeghazi .

The 2012 terrorist attack on the U.S. diplomatic post in Libya was a tragedy, but a year and half of intensive congressional, administrative, and journalistic investigation have failed to produce any compelling evidence that it was a scandal, at least in the way Republicans talk about it when they talk about #benghazi.

"-Ghazi" also shares convenient linguistic parallels with "-gate." They're both scandals that typify their category; they're both location names; they both start with the letter "g"; and they are both short enough to be used in headlines and attached to nouns identifying the scandal.

The George Washington Bridge lane closings started as a "-ghazi" and then became a "-gate."

Last year's IRS controversy, on the other hand, moved in the opposite direction. It looked very bad at first, but as new data emerged , it was clear there was no real scandal and the media lost interest. Nonetheless, the alleged targeting of tea-party nonprofit groups remains very much alive among conservatives (it was huge shot in the arm to some groups). It was a "-gate" and then became a "-ghazi."

The Obama era is chock-full of "-ghazis"Solyndraghazi, ObamaPhoneghazi , NewBlackPanthersghazi, Umbrellaghazi , and of course Benghazibut few "-gates" (Snowdengate and Websitegate, come to mind). A "-gate" doesn't necessarily require high-profile scalps or big policy change, but it must be widely regarded as a scandal and

be treated in the mainstream media as such. "-Ghazis," on the other hand, are a partisan fixation whose ignominy and importance are self-evident and unquestionable to devotees but largely ignored by the rest of the world.

Partisans, of course, will continue trying to turn "-ghazis" into "-gates" until RobotInsurrectiongate makes the issue moot sometime in the not-so-distant future. But journalists should at least try to hold the linguistic line until then.

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